<Book Reviews> Moving Mountains: Ethnicity and Livelihoods in Highland China, Vietnam, and Laos JEAN MICHAUD and TIM FORSYTH, eds. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011, xvi+235p.

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Moving Mountains: Ethnicity and Livelihoods in Highland China, Vietnam, and Laos

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"When the Government is Asleep"

Moving Mountains is a nicely edited collection of papers relating to diverse situations in the uplands of three countries that fell under communist regimes: China (the portion south of the Yangtze), Vietnam, and Laos. The book regards this territory as the eastern portion of the Southeast Asian Massif or "Zomia" to use the term made current by Scott (2009), a mountainous land peopled by a wide variety of minorities from five ethnolinguistic families estimated to speak more than 1,500 languages. Regardless of one's assessment of Scott, the term is useful, though the inclusion here, like in Scott, of the Tai groups of southern China and northern Vietnam as Zomians is debatable, since the upland (or formerly upland) groups, despite their linguistic diversity, and despite being scattered over thousands of kilometers, share more in common with each other than with lowland groups who, in some cases, may live only a few meters away. Indeed, Zomia might more productively be considered a state of mind rather than a geographic territory.

Also like Scott, the work focuses mainly on the bilateral relationship between the ethnic group and the abstract state (or markets, or global trends), as opposed say, to the multilateral interactions of groups with each other and the state. And while change emerges as a focus of the papers, what does not change appears as the main point in each instance, framed throughout the volume as *agency*. The governments involved all share the institutionalized hypocrisy of lauding ethnic diversity while at the same time insisting on sameness. What differs perhaps is the efficiency with which they are able to enact and maintain programs that support this pretense.

The subtitle, *Ethnicity and Livelihoods* . . . , immediately casts the work into the realm of economic development and establishes its purpose as essentially didactic; cautionary tales to development organizations on what takes place beneath the surface when the civilizing project arrives in the mountains, or more to the point, when the mountains are brought to the state for

assessment and sentencing, hence the title, *Moving Mountains*. The spirit of the volume is best captured by the words of a Hmong woman cited by Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, as what happens "when the government is asleep."

The editors view this movement through the lens of three main themes. First is the idea that identities of peoples marginal to the nations under consideration are molded by states and markets in addition to their own *agency*—though precisely how this latter works is not made clear and seems to be an explanation not unlike Molière's *dormitive principle* in "Le Malade Imaginaire." The second theme set forth is that of *transnationalism* as exemplified by cross-border trade and *historic social networks across state borders*. This theme would perhaps be more compelling if it were more prominent in the papers included in the collection. In most of the contributions it is mentioned only in passing or in some cases not at all. Trans-ethnic would have been more relevant given the high levels of ethnic diversity in each location though that would have required an additional area of focus. The third theme concerns provision of a more nuanced ground-up view of conditions in particular locales as opposed to the more generalized stateless assumption made by Scott and others. This is commendable, though in the end, the conclusion might be restated to infer that through camouflage and subterfuge the groups under consideration have managed to retain their statelessness despite intrusions from governments and markets.

The inclusion of Tais as Zomians in the papers by Sturgeon and Mellac perplexes. Throughout Southeast Asia, including Yunnan, Kwangsi, and Kweichou, Tai speaking people inhabit lowlands, whether open flatlands or narrow valleys, and practice wet rice paddy cultivation. Even the more distant Kam-Sui family are mostly paddy farmers with the exception of T'en (Li 1968) who were said to practice upland rice cultivation as did the even more distant Hlai groups on Hainan (Stübel and Meriggi 1937) and small enclaves of Kadai (Kra) on the mainland (Bonifacy 1906). Thus, since whatever time depth might be assigned to Proto-Tai-Kam-Sui (2,500–3,000 BP?) they have always been lowlanders, juxtaposed to uplanders by language and by the type of rice cultivation (*dry* vs *wet*). Simplistic as this may seem, for members of the same ethnolinguistic family to have sustained this distinctive trait over the large area stretching from Guangxi in the east to Assam in the west, and from Guizhou in the north to southern Thailand, cannot be ignored. So, even though Tai populations may be considered minorities in the various states such as Vietnam and China, in relation to the upland peoples, they behave more like states, a notion that is lost in *Moving Mountains* as inter-ethnic relationships are largely overlooked. A good example are the Tai (known cryptically as Thái and Tày) in northwestern Vietnam represented in this volume whose feudal systems are well known vis-à-vis the Khmou (Sa < *khra) and Ksing Mul (Puak < *buak) in the west, or the Nung and Kadai (Lachi, Laqua) further east. It is no accident that the Chinese since the Han have classified the Tai and Chuang as "halter and bridle" mini-states with relative autonomy under the *Tusi* system, proxies for the Han as it were. So why then, are they considered here as Zomians? The Thái in Mellac's chapter, judging from the location, appear to be White Tai (Tai

Done) whose identity should have been mentioned because culturally and linguistically they are distinct from the Black Tai (Tai Dam). The Tày of Sa Pa in the same paper are probably Yay (aka Giay or Nhang) originally from Guizhou (that is, Pu-Yi) (Haudricourt 1960),[1] though here again this is not specified. These are a northern branch group similar to what nowadays are referred to as Northern Chuang in Guangxi and Pu-Yi in Guizhou. The Yay appear to have migrated from Guizhou south into Vietnam some 300 years ago (Edmondson 1998), that is, they are more closely related to Pu-Yi and do not descend directly from the Guangxi Northern Chuang population. These distinctions are important by the very criteria that this volume sets forth. Sturgeon's linking of the Tai-speaking Lue with the Tibeto-Burman Akha raises the question as to how two ethnic groups with such highly divergent modes of social organization interact with each other, but the issue is never mentioned, let alone explained.

This kind of criticism might be construed as too overly fussy or intricate, but then we come to the chapter on Khmu by Évrard where it may be seen just how meaningful such attention to detail becomes. From the point of view of ethnolinguistic classification, the term Tai (used in the Mellac paper discussed above) is of the same logical type as Mon-Khmer; Southwestern Tai (equal to Thái or Tày) would be equivalent to Khmuic; Black Tai would be equivalent to Khmu; and the various subgroups of Black Tai (Tai Vat, Tai Mouay, etc.) would be equivalent to the Khmu subgroups or *tmooys* (Rok, Lue, Nyouan, and Kwène). The *tmooys* described by Évrard represent the Khmu indigenous classification, and has been overlooked by developers, along with the relevance of history and ethnicity in the understanding of livelihoods. To the peoples who are the subject of this volume, such distinctions are of momentous importance, as Évrard ably demonstrates; their recognition marking the critical difference between insider and outsider knowledge.

McKinnon emphasizes the same point in his contribution on the Hani and their tortuous recent history. "Developers [and we could add, States]," he writes, "think that they know what is best for a local population; yet, what outsiders consider best may not be what the people for whom the assistance is intended really want" (p. 142).

Tugault-Lafleur and Turner's article on the Hmong in Vietnam indeed demonstrates the high value placed on non-economic aspects of livelihoods and the ability of this group to avoid falling into the traps of state and donor defined development dogmas such as *poverty*.

Daviau's contribution on the Tarieng of Xekong Province in Laos provides a stark illustration of the micro-level communist social engineering to which this ethnic group has been subjected and yet has managed to evade, even in the face of physical relocation. The point is made that such coercion may indeed strengthen ethnic resolve and covert resistance to government plans. As Daviau observes, this is no doubt the case with many other upland groups who face similar attempts

1) One of the two Nhang [Nhắng] dialects from the 1939 "l'enquête linguistique" is from Chapa (ME 207, VIII, 5, by M. Dao-quang-Hiên).

by the government to trivialize traditional livelihoods and cultures.

Sadly, this discourse is largely invisible to donors who view development entirely in terms of superficial economic indicators created to further their own agendas. Thus *Moving Mountains* represents an important resource for the development enterprise as well as a fine collection of academic papers all of which serve to remind the reader of the importance of the micro viewpoint in assessing what changes and what does not.

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Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture

JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009, 368p.

Current studies on the religious culture of Lao ethnic groups began with S. J. Tambiah's structural-functionalistic analysis (1970) and have progressed mainly through Tiyavanich's biographical study on the traditions of forest monks (1997) and Hayashi's historio-sociological ethnography of practical Buddhism (2003). While these studies were conducted on the right bank of the Mekong River in the part of northeastern Thailand, generally known as Isan, Lao religious studies on the other side of the Mekong river, in the present Lao PDR, have been very limited until recently. In fact, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* is the first book to focus on Lao religion by bringing together a wide range of previous studies concerning Lao history, politics, and cultures.